THE SHEPHERD GIVES LIFE

John 10:1-18

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THE SYMBOL OF JESUS CHRIST AS A SHEPHERD TENDING A FLOCK IS A POPULAR ONE. ONE OF THE BEST KNOWN PICTURES OF OUR LORD AND ONE OF THE MOST BELOVED IS THE ONE THAT WE SEE HERE EACH SUNDAY. IT RADIATES A FEELING THAT WE LIKE, THERE IS SOMETHING ABOUT THE IMAGE OF A SHEPHERD THAT FILLS US WITH ASSURANCE. JESUS, HIMSELF, SAW HIS MISSION IN PART AS THAT OF A SHEPHERD AND ON NUMEROUS OCCASIONS HE USES A PARABLE OR STORY ABOUT A SHEPHERD TO ILLUSTRATE HIS POINT. THE METAPHOR DOES NOT STOP HERE, HOWEVER. THE SHEEP ARE NOT JUST ADDED FOR DECORATION BUT ARE SYMBOLIC ALSO, OF MANKIND AND IF YOU PLEASE, OF YOU AND I.

THERE ARE PROBABLY FEW ANIMALS THAT ARE MORE HELPLESS THAN SHEEP. IT HAS BEEN CLAIMED THAT THEY ARE THE LEAST ACTIVE MENTALLY OF ALL ANIMALS, IT IS KNOWN THAT THEIR SENSES ARE LESS ACCUTE THAN OTHER BEASTS, THEY ARE EASILY EXCITABLE AND USUALLY QUITE DEPENDENT ON SOMEONE TO LEAD THEM TO FOOD AND WATER AND TO PROTECT THEM. WHEN WE CONSIDER A FLOCK OF SHEEP, AIMLESSLY WANDERING, WAITING TO BE LED, OUR COMPARISON TO THEM BECOMES CLEAR. AS IS TRUE THROUGHOUT THE GOSPELS, OUR LORD IN THIS SYMBOL, HAS SHOWN HIMSELF A MASTER AT DESCRIBING PHENOMENA IN CONCISE CLEAR CUT PICTURES.

TO FULLY UNDERSTAND THE SHEPHERD IMAGE OF JESUS WE MUST TAKE A LOOK AT THE PARTICULAR TYPE OF SHEPHERDING THAT WENT ON IN PALESTINE 2,000 YEARS AGO. OUR CONCEPTION OF A SHEPHERD HAS PERHAPS BEEN MOLDED BY THE PICTURE OF SHEEP GRAZING ON A PLAIN, OF ROUGH

TOUGH RANCHERS DRIVING THEM TO THE RAILROAD DEPOT FOR SHIPMENT TO THE SLAUGHTER HOUSE. ON THE CONTRARY, SHEPHERDING IN JESUS' DAY WAS A DIFFERENT THING ENTIRELY: IT WAS SOMEWHAT OF AN ART.

IN THE NEAR EAST, WHERE WATER AND SUITABLE PASTURE LAND ARE QUITE SCARCE SHEEP HAVE TRADITIONALLY BEEN ~~ABOUT THE ONLY ANIMAL THAT COULD SURVIVE~~ THE MOST SUITABLE ANIMAL TO RAISE. FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS THE ONLY CLOTHING KNOWN WAS MADE FROM THE VERY VALUABLE WOOL; AND A TREAT IT WAS WHEN ONE OF THE PRECIOUS BEASTS WAS SLAUGHTERED AND EATEN. IN THIS CONTEXT THE SHEPHERD WAS AN IMPORTANT MAN. IN THE EARLY SPRING HE WOULD TAKE HIS FLOCK UP INTO THE HILLS TO FIND PASTURE AND THERE THEY WOULD STAY FOR APPROXIMATELY SEVEN MONTHS, WANDERING FROM HILL TO HILL IN SEARCH OF GRASSY PASTURE UNTIL THE COLDNESS FORCED THEM TO RETURN. THE SHEPHERD HAD TO BE BRAVE AND CAPABLE OF DEFENDING HIS SHEEP FROM THE PROWLING WOLVES OR FROM HUNGRY ROBBER BANDS. HE HAD TO BE PATIENT AND YET QUICK TO OBSERVE CHANGES IN WEATHER AND PASTURE. HE HAD TO POSSESS IMMENSE STAMINA TO ENDURE ENDLESS STILLNESS AND LONELINESS. I OFTEN WONDER HOW WE, WHO AUTOMATICALLY FLIP THE CAR RADIO ON TO KILL THE SILENCE, WOULD DO AS SHEPHERDS.

BECAUSE OF HIS EXISTENCE THE SHEPHERD WAS A THOUGHTFUL MAN. MANY AN HOUR HE WOULD MEDITATE ON THE MEANING OF LIFE, THE LOVE OF GOD, HIS JEWISH FAITH. AND AS YOU KNOW

A PARTICULAR KIND OF MUSIC CAME FROM THESE MEN. BOTH TO WHILE AWAY EMPTY HOURS AND TO CALM THEIR FLOCK THEY DEVELOPED AMAZING MUSICAL SKILL, SINGING, + PLAYING ON VARIOUS WOODEN FLUTES AND HARPS. DAVID WAS A SHEPHERD BOY AND BEGAN HIS ILLUSTRIOUS CAREER, SIGNIFICANTLY, BY SINGING AND TENDING TO SHEEP.

ABOVE ALL ELSE THE SHEPHERD HAD TO BE A TENDER AFFECTIONATE MAN. HIS CARE OF THE FLOCK HAD TO BE CONTINUOUS, HIS SHEEP KNEW AND TRUSTED HIM, HE IN TURN TREATED THEM WITH CONCERN AND AFFECTION.

THIS IS AN IMAGE THAT HAS LASTED, IT INSPIRED LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN TO COMPOSE HIS ~~THE~~ PASTORAL SYMPHONY: THE PHRASE "HE SHALL FEED HIS SHEEP" APPEARS IN ONE OF THE MOST BEAUTIFUL ARIAS EVER WRITTEN IN HANDEL'S MESSIAH.

THE SHEPHERD GAVE LIFE TO HIS SHEEP, THEY COULD NOT EXIST ON THE ROCKY PALESTINE TERRAIN WITHOUT HIM, THEY WERE DEPENDENT ON HIM, HE GAVE THEM LIFE.

IT IS WITHIN THIS CONTEXT THAT JESUS USED THE SYMBOL OF THE SHEPHERD, AND WHEN WE THINK ABOUT IT WE ARE HELPED BY CONSIDERING EVERYTHING THE WORD SHEPHERD MEANT WHEN HE USED IT.

AS A SHEPHERD HE OFFERS LIFE TO HIS SHEEP, NOT JUST EXISTING, BUT LIFE ABUNDANT. IF WE WILL BUT TRUST AND FOLLOW WE MAY CLAIM THIS LIFE FOR OUR OWN. IT IS NOT A RESTRICTIVE, SOURFACED LIFE BUT LIFE ABUNDANT, LIFE FULL AND COMPLETE WITH MEANING IN EVERY MINUTE. HE OFFERS REAL LIFE NOT JUST A CHEAP SUBSTITUTE.

THERE IS ANOTHER SIDE TO THE STORY AND HERE IS WHERE WE COME IN. THE FLOCK DOES NOT RESIDE IN ABSOLUTE SAFETY AND COMFORT, ALL IS NOT BLISSFUL EXISTENCE. THERE ARE ROBBERS AND THIEVES WHO ATTEMPT TO CLIMB INTO THE FOLD AT NIGHT TO PLUNDER AND STEAL. THERE ARE STILL THE WILD BEASTS THAT POSE A CONSTANT THREAT TO LIFE. THERE ARE ALWAYS THOSE WHO, POSING AS THE SHEPHERD, WILL TRY TO LEAD THE FLOCK ASTRAY, TO DIVERT ITS ATTENTION FROM ITS MASTER, TO CUNNINGLY LURE IT AWAY FROM LIFE ABUNDANT.

THIS IS RELEVANT! IN THE FORM OF A PRETTY SHEPHERD STORY OUR LORD LOOKED AT ALL OF MANKIND, HIS CONTEMPORARIES, US, AND MEN FOR AGES TO COME, AND SAW THAT ALL WOULD NOT BE IN THE FOLD, THAT ALTERNATIVES TO LIFE ABUNDANT WOULD ALWAYS BE PRESENT, TEMPTING, LURING, PROMISING A BETTER LIFE. HE KNEW THAT THERE WERE SHEEP WHO DID NOT KNOW THE VOICE OF THE SHEPHERD, SHEEP THAT WOULD STUMBLE INTO ANY TRAP. HE KNEW THAT WE WOULD BE FACED WITH ALTERNATIVES, WAYS OF LIVING AND THINKING THAT APPEAR INFINITELY BETTER AND MORE COMOFRTABLE THAN HIS WAY. THIS IS BITING. DOWN THROUGH TWENTY CENTURIES IT SPEAKS TO OUR SITUATION AS IF ITS SOURCE WAS IN OUR OWN DAY.

WE, AS CHRISTIANS, ARE BY NO MEANS SAFE, WE ARE NOT IMMUNE TO ALL THE ALTERNATIVES THAT PRESENT THEMSELVES INCONSPICUOUSLY IN OUR DAILY LIVES. THE WALLS OF THE FOLD ARE CONSTANTLY BEING SCALED, THROUGH THE DOOR COMES THE CONSTANT PLEA TO FOLLOW, TO GIVE YOUR ALL TO THIS OR THAT. AT NO OTHER TIME IN HISTORY HAS THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST HAD TO CONTEND WITH SO MANY ALTERNATIVES AND STRONG TEMPETITORS. LIFE IS FILLED

WITH SO MANY THINGS TO DO, PLACES TO GO, ORGANIZATIONS TO JOIN AND CAUSES TO WHICH WE MUST PLEDGE OUR SUPPORT, THAT LIFE ABUNDANT ACCORDING TO JESUS CHRIST OFTEN GETS LOST IN THE TUSSEL. /THERE ARE SOME AREAS TO WHICH WE CAN TURN THAT ARE PRECISELY ANTITHETICAL TO ANYTHING CHRISTIAN. UNDER THIS HEADING WOULD BE COMMUNISM, FASCISM, OR ANY RELIGION WHOSE BELIEFS CONFLICT WITH THOSE REVEALED BY JESUS CHRIST. /THESE ALTERNATIVES ARE OBVIOUS, THEY ARE BIG AND BOISTROUS, THEY DEFINE THEIR STAND, AND WE IN TURN USUALLY AVOID THEM. THEY ARE MORE LIKE THE BAND OF ROBBEERS WHOSE APPROACHING CAN BE DETECTED, AND WHOSE ASSAULT CAN BE TURNED BACK.

IN THE PARABLES OF OUR LORD, HOWEVER, IT IS THE ONE THAT STEALTHILY CREEPS OVER THE WALL, THAT SNEAKS IN THE BACK DOOR THAT IS THE REAL THREAT. THIS IS THE THIEF THAT PICKS AWAY AT THE FLOCK ONE BY ONE UNTIL ONE DAY, TOO LATE, THE SHEPHERED REALIZES THE EXTENT OF HIS WORK. THESE ARE THE THREATS TO OUR FAITH THAT WE MUST OBSERVE, THESE ARE THE THREATS THAT LIE IN EVERY MINUTE OF OUR DAILY LIVES, THESE ARE THE THREATS THAT ARE LETHAL.

~~THESE THREATS, OR ALTERNATIVES TO CHRISTIANITY ARE TOO NUMEROUS TO EVEN MENTION~~ THIS MORNING BUT I WOULD LIKE TO MENTION A FEW OF THE MOST SUBTLE AND DISASTROUS OF THEM.

LAST WEEK A HUMAN BEING WAS LIFTED INTO SPACE, AND THERE IN A MAN MADE CAPSULE HE ORBITED THE EARTH. RIGHT NOW IN OFFICES ALL OVER THE WORLS COMPUTING MACHINES ARE CALCULATING

FIGURING AND SPEWING FORTH ANSWERS 100 TIMES FASTER THAN A SINGLE HUMAN COULD DO. IN ALL PROBABILITY WITHIN A FEW YEARS, IN A LABORTORY SOMEWHERE IN OUR LAND A BIO-CHEMIST WILL FUSE TOGETHER THE PROPER COMBINATION OF ELEMENTS AND A ONE CELLED PLANT WILL COME INTO EXISTENCE. MAN WILL HAVE CREATED LIFE. SCIENCE IS INDEED THE DARLING OF THE 20th CENTURY AND OF OUR CULTURE. SCIENCE HAS GIVEN US THE HIGHEST STANDARD OF LIVING IN THE WORLD, IT HAS PROVIDED US WITH UNHEARD OF LUXURIES AND COMFORTS, IT HAS LENGTHED OUR LIFE EXPECTANCY AND HELPED US TO GROW GRASS, IT HAS MADE OUR CAR SEATS SOFTER AND OUR RADIO'S STRONGER. I DO NOT SAY THESE THINGS IN A DEROGATORY MANNER, WE HAVE BEEN RICHLY BLESSED BECAUSE OF SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH AND DISCOVERY. BUT SO GREAT AN INFLUENCE IS OF OUR LIVES AS SCIENCE HAS NOT BEEN CONTAINED AS AN ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE, BUT HAS INVADED EVERYTING WE DO. WE PRIDE OURSELVES IN BEING SCIENTIFIC. ADVERTISERS HAVE LEARNED THAT ONE WAY OF ASSURING A GOOD MARKET FOR A PRODUCT IS TO GET THE NEWS TO THE PUBLIC THAT IT HAS BEEN SCIENTIFICALLY TESTED. WE MAKE A POINT OF DOING THINGS SCIENTIFICALLY

UNCONSCIOUSLY, QUIETLY AND STEALTHILY SCIENCE HAS INVADED OUR THINKING, PUSHING OUT ANYTHING IN ITS PATH. AS A PEOPLE WE HAVE, UNINTENTIONALLY, BIT BY BIT PUT ALL OUR FAITH IN SCIENCE. WITHOUT REALLY BEING AWARE OF IT WE DEPEND ON THE LABORTORY FOR OUR ULTIMATE ANSWERS, AND IN SO DOING HAVE INFLATED THE ROLE OF SCIENCE IN OUR CULTURE FROM A BIT PART—TO THE ROLE OF DIRECTOR.

IN THIS CONTEXT SCIENCE VERY SUBTLY HAS BECOME AN ALTERNATIVE TO OUR RELIGIOUS FAITH. IT HAS COME IN THE BACK DOOR AND THREATENED THE VERY EXISTENCE OF THE FLOCK.

THROUGHOUT HISTORY AND IN OUR OWN PAST THERE HAVE BEEN TIMES WHEN NATIONALISM OR RADICAL PATRIOTISM HAVE BECOME AN ALTERNATIVE TO RELIGIOUS FAITH. CONFIDENCE IN AND LOVE OF A PARTICULAR POLITICAL SYSTEM OR GOVERNMENT HAVE OFTEN PROMPTED MEN TO SAYING I AM AN AMERICAN, OR ENGLISHMAN OR GERMAN FIRST AND A CHRISTIAN SECONE. WHEN THIS IS THE CASE PATRIOTISM HAS SNEAKED OVER THE WALL AND NIBBLED AWAY AT THE FLOCK. THIS IS NOT TO SAY THAT ONE CANNOT BE BOTH CHRISTIAN AND PATRIOTIC. BUT PATRIOTISM IS LOVE OF COUNTRY/ CHRISTIANITY IS LOVE OF GOD/ AND THE TWO CANNOT EVEN BE COMPARED.

AS WE FACE A WORLD WITH SO MANY OPTIONS, SO MANY BECKONING CALLS WE MUST REMEMBER THAT WE ARE DEPENDENT ON THE SHEPHERD FOR OUR SAFETY AND FOR OUR LIVES. REGARDING THESE ALTERNATIVES HE TELLS US THAT THEY SIMPLY DO NOT CONSTITUTE LIFE ABUNDANT, THAT LIFE WHICH HE OFFERS.

THE POPULAR NOTION OF THE WAY OF LIFE OFFERED BY JESUS CHRIST IS ONE OF LONG FACED PIETY, OF RESTRICTIVENESS, WE OFTEN THINK OF CHRISTIANITY IN TERMS OF "I CAN'T DO THIS OR THAT OR THAT AND SO ON. THIS SIMPLY IS NOT A TRUE PICTURE, WE NEED ONLY REMEMBER THE REST OF THE STORY AS JESUS COMPARES HIMSELF FURTHER WITH THE SHPEHERD WHO GIVES LIFE/ AND GIVES IT ABUNDANTLY.

ABUNDANT LIFE NOT HALF LIFE, LIFE THAT CAN BE LIVED ONLY IN PART. WHAT HE OFFERS TO HIS SHEEP IS LIFE THAT CAN BE AFFIRMED, LIFE THAT CAN BE ENJOYED IN ITS FULLNESS. IN HIS FOLD THERE IS TO BE FOUND REFUGE AND ASSURANCE THAT ARE GOOD AGAINST ANY ODDS. THE ASSURANCE OF SCIENCE IS GOOD ONLY UP TO A POINT, FOR SCIENCE HAS ALSO PRODUCED THE MEANS OF OUR ANNIHILATION. NATIONALISM IS A TRULY GREAT CAUSE UP TO A POINT, FOR IT IS CENTERED IN ONE COUNTRY THAT IS IMPORTANT ONLY HERE AND NOW. OUR COMFORT AND WELL BEING ARE FINE, OUR OBSESSION WITH JOINING ORGANIZATIONS IS VALID, BUT THESE DO NOT GIVE ANSWERS TO ULTIMATE QUESTIONS. THEIR OFFERING IS A NARROW TEMPORARAL LIFE BUT NOT LIFE ABUNDANT.

AS A SHEPHERD TO HIS SHEEP JESUS CHRIST OFFERS US LIFE THAT HAS MEANING HERE AND NOW, COMPLETE AND FULL LIFE AND AN ASSURANCE OF LIFE EVERLASTING. THIS IS LIFE ABUNDANT.

SHEEP WHO DO NOT KNOW THE SHEPHERD'S VOICE ARE EASILY LED ASTRAY. LURING SUBTLE APPEALS CAN BE SUCCESSFUL IN DIVERTING THEM FROM THE CARE OF THEIR MASTER. THIS IS OUR PROBLEM. WE, LIKE SHEEP, CAN BE LED ASTRAY. NEVER FULLY KNOWING THE SHEPHERD, NEVER DIVING HEAD LONG INTO LIFE ABUNDANT WE ARE EASY VICTIMS OF THE ALTERNATIVES TO OUR FAITH.

WE ARE CONSTANTLY FACED WITH A DECISION. WILL WE WELCOME LIFE ABUNDANT? WILL WE ACCEPT THE CARE OF A LOVING SHEPHERD? OR WILL WE IGNORE HIS EFFORTS AND SET OUT ON OUR OWN FOR BETTER PASTURES? THIS IS A QUESTION THAT MUST BE RESOLVED IN EVERY LIFE, IN EVERY DAY OF OUR EXISTENCE. WILL WE ONLY ACCEPT?